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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, May 15, 1935

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "UNFRIENDLY PLANTS." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, United States Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

The news I have for you today is about three common and dangerous plants. I'm mentioning them early in the season because often they make the most trouble in the spring when they're extra full of sap. You know, plants that grow wild are either our friends or our enemies. The friendly plants we use as food or medicine or garden decorations. Fortunately, the unfriendly plants are few. But for safety we'll all do well to recognize them when we see them -- recognize them and keep our distance.

The first plant up for discussion is that most troublesome and familiar weed -- poison ivy. I've heard many people say that they're immune to poisoning from this plant -- that they can handle it at any time without harm. Well, maybe so. And then again, maybe not. The men in the Department of Agriculture who have had long experience and made many investigations of this troublesome plant say that immunity just doesn't exist. Some time or other poison ivy is likely to get you "ef you don't watch out." The worst of it is that after you've had one attack of poisoning, you're more susceptible to it.

This is one weed that human beings can't stand close acquaintance with. If you try to get intimate with it, you're all too likely to regret it. It contains an oily substance that is violently irritating to the skin. All parts of the plant contain the penetrating oil, even when the plant is dry. Many people have suffered badly just from burning the plant. But the most dangerous time, as we said, is spring. If you brush against the ivy or even handle clothing that has come against it, you're likely to get some of the poison on your skin. I know a woman who was badly poisoned by patting her dog after he had run through an ivy patch in the woods. If you have walked through ivy, don't handle your shoes or any clothing that touched it. After exposure, the inflammation may appear within a few hours, or it may wait five days or more before breaking out.

Of course, the best way to prevent ivy poisoning is to avoid the plant completely. But if you've taken any chances with it, better give your skin a thorough lathering with strong soap -- laundry soap -- and hot water when you come home. Sometimes just a little washing will spread the oil. But if you use strong soap -- several washings and rinsings, you should be able to remove all traces of that irritating substance from the surface of your skin before it works in. Use running water to rinse it off, and use plenty of soap under your finger nails.

Then, if inflamation starts, here are some remedies that have proved helpful: a five percent solution of potassium permanganate; cooking soda, or Epsom salt in a little water. Don't apply any ointment of any kind in the early stages for that simply spreads the trouble.

Well, you see why the men who have studied this dangerous weed say everyone who goes picnicking and camping or even walking in the woods in summer should recognize it and keep out of its way. Its distinguishing feature is its leaf arrangement -- three leaflets on a straight sturdy stem -- "leaflets three, let it be," as the old rhyme goes. The leaflets are deep green and rather shiny on the upper surface -- lighter underneath. They are usually pointed, but you will also find somewhat rounded, deeply notched leaves. One variety of poison ivy is called poison oak because the leaflets look so much like small oak leaves. Poison ivy flowers are tiny and yellowish white and grow in clusters. They appear in early summer. The berries follow them and are first green and then waxy white, much like mistletoe. In the fall ivy leaves turn a beautiful scarlet and orange color. But, handsome as they are, the specialists don't recommend them for household decoration.

Poison ivy is a hardy and adaptable plant. It grows in all parts of the United States, in dry places and wet soil, in sand -- almost anywhere. You may find it in the form of a vine or a bush. It is very common along fences, scrambling over rocks and walls, or climbing posts and trees.

Poison sumac is a relative of poison ivy and causes the same kind of trouble. The same remedies apply, also. Sumac contains more poison than ivy, but fortunately, it is not so common, because it only grows in damp soil and hasn't traveled farther West than Minnesota. The sumac is a tall shrub growing in clumps and has a tall slender stem. Sometimes it even grows like a tree -- as tall as 20 or 30 feet. The sumac leaves are divided into seven to thirteen pointed leaflets, arranged in pairs, with a single leaflet at the end. The fruit is cream colored and much like poison ivy. Many people unaware of the danger from this shrub, have gathered the bright leaves in the fall and have been badly poisoned as a result.

So much for ivy and sumac. Now about one of our more subtle plant enemies-ragweed. Scientists have discovered that this innocent-looking weed is the villain that has been causing much of the autumn hay fever these many years. And here we were blaming the harmless golden rod! More than ninety percent of the autumn hay fever sufferers east of the Mississippi River owe their affliction to ragweed pollen carried by the wind. One of the best ways to prevent this trouble is to cut down the weed before it blooms -- before it buds, if possible. The big ragweed blooms first, often early in August. The common ragweed usually blooms in early September. Some parts of the country put on ragweed-cutting campaigns each year to help hay-fever sufferers. And some states have laws requiring the cutting of ragweed at the proper season.

Well, now I'm going to make two suggestions for your summer reading list. One is the Department of Agriculture bulletin on poison ivy and sumac which contains pictures to help you detect your plant enemies. The other is a leaflet on ragweed, also illustrated. Send the Superintendent of Documents at Washington, D. C., five cents, and he'll mail you the poison ivy bulletin, or the ragwood leaflet.

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